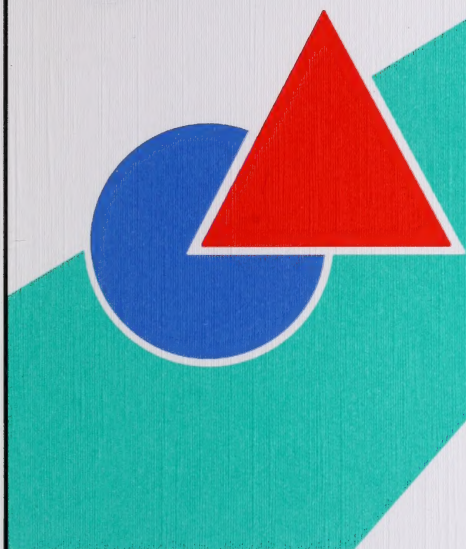


# **SPIRITAN LIFE**



**No° 11  
December  
2000**

**Our Sources  
of Inspiration**

***Spiritan Life*** aims at being a forum for Ongoing Formation and Animation:

- *through the shared experiences of confreres,*
- *through reflection on these experiences,*
- *through the inspiration of our founders, our tradition and the demands of mission today.*

***Editorial Board:*** Jeronimo Cahinga (Portuguese version)

Christian de Mare (French version)

Vincent O'Toole (English version)

Philip Ng'oja (Layout)

John Fogarty (representative of General Council)

***Translations:*** Bernard Reniers, Christian de Mare, Domingos Neiva, Frédéric Mounier, Jean-Yves Urfié, Jeronimo Cahinga, José Dos Reis Gaspar, José Maria de Sousa, José Salgueiro, Nicolas Lhernould, Rhéaume Saint-Louis, Victor Narciso Silva and Vincent O'Toole.

## EDITORIAL

# LIST OF CONTENTS

<b>Editorial .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>“Ma Chère Maladie” .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<i>Michel Boutot</i>	
<b>Community as a source of Inspiration .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>Gaby Vuittenez</i>	
<b>The Evangelisation of a Chaplain .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>William Nugent</i>	
<b>The Inspiration of Lay Spiritans.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<i>Joy and Gary Warner</i>	
<b>Libermann’s sources of Inspiration.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>In a Country divided by War.....</b>	<b>35</b>
<i>Bernardo Bongo</i>	
<b>A Journey through the Wilderness.....</b>	<b>41</b>
<i>Daniel Osei-Yeboah</i>	
<b>An Experience of <i>Lectio Divina</i> .....</b>	<b>47</b>
<i>Michel de Verteuil</i>	
<b>The Joy of witnessing to the Gospel .....</b>	<b>55</b>
<i>Pierre Schouver</i>	
<b>Replies to the Questionnaire on “Spiritans Life” .....</b>	<b>63</b>



*Spiritual Life: A Forum for Ongoing Formation and Awakening*

LIST OF CONTENTS

1	Editorial
3	"Ma Chère Maladie" Michel Bonnot
2	Community as a source of inspiration Gaby Witteney
16	The Evangelization of a Chaplain William Nugent
23	The Insignia of the Holy Spirit Joy and Gaby Witteney
31	Libertarianism as a source of inspiration (Book)
32	In a Country divided by War Bernardo Bonayo
41	A Journey through the Wilderness Daniel Orel-Yehoud
47	An Experience of the Divine Michael A. Vercellotti
55	The Joy of Witnessing to the Gospel Pierre Schouwer
63	Replies to the Questionnaire on "Spiritual Life"

## EDITORIAL

In creating this wonderful world in which we live, God never repeats himself. Each human being is a unique one-off model physically, mentally, temperamentally. And this is nowhere more true than in the realm of spirituality; we all have our individual sources of inspiration, things which encourage and strengthen us, especially when times are difficult. What can be inspiring for one person can sometimes have the opposite effect for another.

Perhaps one could be tempted to assume that people drawn to the same religious family would have much in common in their spiritual life. They share the same ideals and primitive spirit, they look to the same founders and charismatic figures who have influenced the paths along which the Society has evolved. Obviously there is some truth in this. But spirituality is all about relationships – with God himself and with our brothers and sisters – and relationships are always uniquely personal.

Saints differ widely in their spirituality and in those things which inspire them. In the letter of **Francis Libermann** which we include in this edition, he tells Jérôme Schwindenhamer how he found it impossible to follow some of the structured and regimented forms of prayer that were widely esteemed at that time. Forgetting himself and his own human efforts, he strove to be totally open to the Holy Spirit, to be led wherever he wanted him to go. He would not try to be somebody else, however inspiring and edifying that person might be. Each is called to follow a path that God has mapped out for themselves alone.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, if the articles in this edition are all extremely personal. We are very grateful to these confreres who have been willing to share something of their intimate personal life with us. In approaching potential authors, the Editors offered to publish their articles anonymously because of the very private nature of the subject matter, but none of them took up the offer.

**Gabby Vuittenez** (France) speaks of the strength and support he has experienced over many years from a wide variety of communities in



France and Madagascar and of how, in the “community” of Major Superiors in the region of the Indian Ocean, he found much needed help for his ministry of leadership. **Joy and Gary Warner** (TransCanada) give an account of what has inspired them in their many and varied commitments in work for Justice and Peace. **Michel de Verteuil** (Trinidad) describes how *Lectio Divina* has been a central element in his life and in the lives of countless people to whom he is ministering. **Michel Boutot** (Canada) remembers the terrible days of his novitiate when he was suddenly struck down by a sickness that he felt would finish his dream of becoming a Spiritan and of how he found strength and enlightenment in the life and words of Francis Libermann. **Bernardo Bongo** (Angola) and **Daniel Osei-Yeboah** (WAF) recall what kept them going in the terrifying and seemingly hopeless situations of civil war in Angola and Sierra Leone. Finally, **Willy Nugent** (Ireland) is motivated and inspired from what is, at first sight, a most surprising source – the patients in a Dublin psychiatric hospital. He tells us how his vocation is stimulated and challenged by the deep faith and courage of people who are suffering a daily crucifixion.

Perhaps it is a pity that we rarely share at this depth in our community meetings and in our relationships with each other, when we are ready and anxious to give mutual help in so many other practical areas of our life and work as Spiritans. Even if we are unique individuals, knowing what inspires and motivates our confreres can help to lighten the path that we ourselves are called to follow.

### *The Editorial Team*

## “MA CHÈRE MALADIE”

by Michel Boutot

*Michel Boutot is a Spiritan from the Canadian province, currently pastor of a busy Afro-American Church in New Orleans, USA. He is facing many challenges: the fight against racism, the integration of the African-American culture into the Catholic Church, the outreach of the parish to the rest of the neighbourhood and the city. But not many years ago, he could not even have dreamt of such an important and fulfilling apostolate. His novitiate had just begun when he was struck down by a serious illness that seemed to rule out any chance of an active life as a Spiritan. In this article, he candidly tells us of his feelings of despair, a veritable “dark night of the soul”, and how he was given new hope, strength and inspiration by the spirituality and lived example of Francis Libermann - who came to see his crippling epilepsy not as a destroyer of his dreams but as an invitation to share the redemptive sufferings of Jesus. He used to refer to it as “ma chère maladie!” (my dear sickness).*

---

I applied to enter the Spiritan pre-novitiate in 1981 and was accepted. I was so happy and full of hope for the future. I was in the house of Saint-Denis at Montreal. I remember clearly what a fantastic time that first year was – I looked on it as a sort of honeymoon with God. I was beginning a completely new life. When the pre-novitiate came to an end, I asked to move on to the novitiate and was accepted. At that time, the novitiate for North America was at Farnham, to the north of Montreal. I went there with even greater joy.

### **A time for suffering**

It was after three months of the novitiate that I began to have intestinal problems. I went to see a doctor near Farnham and he told me that it was probably not serious. I was put on a strict diet but there was no improvement – in fact it got worse. I started losing a considerable



amount of blood and lost a lot of weight. I then had more thorough medical examinations and the conclusion was that I was suffering from ulcerative colitis (an inflammation of the large intestine). It was not a terminal illness but it would probably involve an operation. After the operation, I should be alright again. Little did I know that this was only the beginning!

I was admitted to a hospital near Farnham but the treatment given proved to be ineffective. After two weeks, I was transferred to the hospital of St. Luke at Montreal, where they specialise in gastroenterology. It was here that I learnt for the first time that I was suffering from Crohn's disease, a permanent inflammation of the digestive system. There is no cure for this sickness; all they could do was to embark on a series of treatments that would enhance the quality of life. But I was assured that much progress had been made in recent times so I was not without hope. I was put on a course of cortisone for 8 months and things improved for about one year. I was able to go out and do certain things and, most important of all, I could continue with the novitiate. But this did not last. In 1984, I had to have a major operation in which the whole of the large intestine was removed and I was given an abdominal bag. Subsequently, between 1984 and 1988, I had to undergo six more operations.

### **A time for questioning**

During this time, I was beset by all kinds of questions that kept preying on my mind. What could I possibly do in life if I was already a chronic invalid at the age of 24? Who would want to employ me knowing that I could fall ill at any moment? Different thoughts about my sickness went through my mind. Is it hereditary? Is it caused by an allergy to certain substances? Is it psychosomatic? This last thought was the most terrifying for me for it undermined my very existence. For me, it meant a loss of control of my mind over my body.

And there was another agonising question to be faced: should I continue my journey to become a Spiritan? Was this God's way of telling me that I should no longer think of joining the Congregation?



Yet I felt I would be incapable of doing anything else. What on earth did God want of me? I couldn't understand why God would use such a roundabout way to tell me something important.

These were the sort of questions that haunted me throughout the period of my sickness and beyond. I felt that at the age of 24, one is expected to try to transform the world, especially a committed Christian. But here I was, a bag of suffering, that was no use to anybody. My life had no meaning or value and all that had happened to me made no sense. I decided to try psychotherapy and to have regular sessions with my spiritual director. But there was nothing that really satisfied me.

### **A time for searching**

It's a funny thing, but at that time everything revolved around one question: what does God want me to do? I told myself that if I could find the answer to that question, I would be able to deal with anything, including the sickness.

The search became almost obsessive; I *had* to know what God was asking me. After all I had put into my Christian journey, and knowing how much the God of Jesus Christ had been central to my life, I simply could not accept what appeared to be the silence of God.

I was far from understanding everything that God wanted of me, but in my searching I did begin to find some considerations that helped me move forward. It was above all in thinking about my vocation that things became a little clearer; my commitment to the Spiritan life seemed to preserve my trust in God and gave me a reason for living. Finally, I made the decision that unless the Superior of the formation community or the Provincial asked me to leave, I would press ahead with my Spiritan religious formation.

### **A time for reflecting**

I remembered that during what people referred to as my "numerous novitiates", we did a lot of work on the history of the Congregation and the writings of our founders. I was especially struck by a book in the

library of the novitiate called, *The Spiritual Letters of the Venerable Francis Libermann, Volume II*. I found this an inspiring collection and all through my illness, it was always close to hand. There was another book, written by a French Spiritan, which talked about the sickness of Libermann and the spirituality with which he faced up to this period of his life. In Libermann, I found a perfect mixture of existentialism and spirituality: he always seemed to base his spiritual advice on a particular experience undergone by the person to whom he was writing.

When I was in formation, I heard a lot about the “precious sickness” of Francis Libermann – the epilepsy that apparently was going to ruin all his dreams. He had no alternative but to accept it, along with the vanishing prospect of ever being ordained. With great patience and resignation, he followed this mysterious path where the Lord was leading him. Throughout my own years of sickness, I saw Libermann not so much as a model but as somebody who knew what he was talking about. I felt very close to him in my spiritual struggles. I saw in him somebody who echoed what I had always felt in my moments of anguish: that to *suffer* for God and his plan of salvation had a lot more saving power in it than any amount of religious and missionary *doing*! I was often strengthened in following my vocation by the light of his example and the way in which he understood his spiritual journey.

### **A time for sharing**

Between 1984 and 1985, I had the opportunity to share and develop some of my thoughts on sickness and spirituality with confreres living in the retirement house of the Province. At that time, I was living in the same house. It struck me that there was a great deal in common between the experience of a young 24-year-old, struck down by a chronic sickness, and old missionaries who were mourning for the “active life” of their younger days which they would never see again. I did my best to put all our sufferings into the context of the spiritual vision of suffering of Libermann himself.

When I was sick, I felt utterly useless. I could see no way in which I could contribute to “the salvation of souls”, to use the words of



Libermann. God seemed to be absent in the very heart of my uselessness; life no longer made any sense. Libermann helped me to understand that there are many realities that cannot be grasped by our senses. The sufferings of Jesus brought about the salvation of the world, but in a mysterious way, this salvation is still being completed and we are all invited to contribute through our own sufferings. This is why I dared to tell our retired and sick confreres that they were even more "active" now than they had been when they had their health and strength.

At the time, I thought I was sharing a revelation that had never been preached before! But of course it is a central part of the traditional teaching of the Church: that by accepting our own cross we are united to that of Jesus. Nevertheless, such teachings need to be constantly re-discovered, especially by those who are going through their own experience of lonely suffering and desolation.

The Church and our institutions sometimes continue to think of mission as the work of "active members". This is a phrase that is constantly used in our communities, as if mission is confined to those who are "doing things". But if we really believe that our salvation was brought about by Jesus giving himself to us all in his sufferings and resurrection, then mission is essentially a sharing in this giving and suffering; "passion" and "action" melt into each other to become one reality. Jesus freely gave up his life on the cross (passion) and the Father raised him up again (action)! It seems to me that this is how Libermann understood the mystery of the cross. The work that we do (which is essential if we are able for it) cannot alone contain the whole meaning of our sharing in the mission of Jesus. Perhaps this seems evident, but do we really believe it?

## Conclusion

Today, twelve years after these events, I feel as though I have already forgotten some of the profound lessons that I learnt from them, guided by Francis Libermann. But because of what I went through, I think I am still sensitive to the situation of those whom our society judges to be useless. They are the people who force us to reject our utilitarian

approach to life and to see the presence of God everywhere in our world. And this is where our Spiritan vocation fits in: to reach out to those who are the most oppressed and abandoned in every possible way.

*Michel Boutot,  
Holy Ghost Church,  
2015 Louisiana Avenue,  
New Orleans  
LA 70115-5228,  
USA*



## COMMUNITY LIFE AS A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION

by Gaby Vuittenez

*Gaby Vuittenez of the French Province is currently in charge of the formation house in Lille, northern France, but he spent most of his missionary life working in Madagascar, and that is where his heart is still. He worked in parishes, seminaries, and Spiritan formation houses, as well as being District Superior for six years. He has always had a firm belief in the importance and value of community life for the Spiritan missionary, while at the same time not underestimating its difficulties and limitations.*

---

Community life, the “*conditio sine qua non*” of our Rule of Life, is not always evident in practice and we have all experienced that it is often those who talk most about community who are the most difficult to live with from day to day. Be that as it may, after 35 years as a Spiritan, and having lived many different types of community experience, it is clear to me that it is community life that has formed me as a Spiritan and brought me the most intense moments of my missionary and spiritual life. Without any claim to expertise on the subject and knowing that I am just a very ordinary sort of confrere, I will try to reflect on how these very different communities have contributed to making me a Spiritan.

### **In formation communities**

I will pass rapidly over the large formation communities where I was trained. Undoubtedly, the most important discovery at this stage is that element of complementarity that is essential to all communities: a realisation that the area of responsibility given to me is for the service of the group as a whole. The different temperaments and aptitudes of the confreres result in the acquisition of a package of experiences that

will be useful in the future both on the human and professional level. If we know how to benefit from whatever comes our way, we can put together a very useful and diversified shopping bag of skills when we live in these large communities.

### **My first missionary community**

With my first appointment, I was very fortunate to have an experience of community that was deep and solid, which must have had an effect on all my subsequent experiences of the shared life. So I will linger over this period.

Our team consisted of 5 priests - four Spiritans and a young diocesan priest, who fitted very well into the community. There was a Breton, getting on in years, aware of having lived through the "heroic" days of the past; the superior, who came from Lorraine, a veritable whirlwind, with much experience of working with young people; and an Alsatian who had been there for three years when I arrived. It was a very diversified mixture which, theoretically, could have exploded at any time!

From the start, I realised that this community was not there for its own sake but as an aid to making us better missionaries. They were not an inward-looking group, preoccupied with the niceties of creating community; they were solid and balanced men, very different from each other yet all travelling in the same direction, giving mutual support and encouragement. A community with no mission, no common objective, will be a sterile group that will soon curl up and die. In the four years we were together, we became a genuine team where the members were virtually interchangeable because we knew each other so well and had the habit of working together. If somebody was sick, another could easily take his place without much fuss - a bit like the defence in a good football team where players back each other up. It is always assuring to know that there is somebody behind us to pick up the pieces if something goes wrong. It encourages us to be innovative and take calculated risks. Apart from the prayer of the Church that we shared together each day, we managed to set aside a day or two from time to



time for silence and recollection. There was nothing formal about this; it just happened naturally, answering a need that we all felt.

I will never forget how, after a long trek, those in the house would drop everything to welcome back the traveller. Over a beer, our community would once more be created as we recounted our daring adventures and swapped news of what had happened since we last met. I also have fond memories of those Sunday afternoons when, once our work was finished, we settled down to a game of cards. The convention was that the losers had to prepare the supper! They were good times where I think we lived a genuinely fraternal life.

I am convinced that to live an authentic community life, each member must be able to live alone when needs be. Community should not be a need but rather a choice of life, a desire to share what one has and to receive from others.

### **An extended community**

When I was appointed to another mission, I had no feeling of having to leave the hothouse of my first appointment to face the realities of the outside world; I was rather full of enthusiasm to go and live the same sort of experience elsewhere. Unfortunately, I found myself as the only Spiritan in the town, a member of an extended Spiritan community that met for a couple of days every two months. I lived and worked with a Madagascan diocesan priest. I was able to establish a certain degree of solitude: religious life has different needs to those of the secular priest. The memory and lessons learnt from my first community experience were enough to help me through this period when I was deprived of Spiritan community in the strict sense. And the "community desert" I set up allowed me to interiorise certain values: to be able to live a genuine community life, we also have to be able to take on a certain solitude.

### **A community in the Province.**

I was then recalled to work in a formation community in the French province with one other confrere. It was not an easy adaptation; it

meant getting to know the Church in France again and living in a community that was very circumscribed compared to the vast areas that we covered in Madagascar. It was demanding, but at the same time, very profitable. When there are only two in a community, you just have to get on together! I have good memories of those four years in community in France where I learnt not only to appreciate the values of the Spiritan way of life but also to communicate them to others. Whatever we said had to be well thought out beforehand. We could not get away with just going through the motions of community life; everything had to be genuine. We shared our work, our prayer and our annoyances.

### **The major seminary in Madagascar**

When this experience of a “community laboratory” came to an end, I was asked to join a team of formators in the national senior seminary of Madagascar. Several confreres advised me not to touch it because it was a no-win situation. But I did accept and found myself the only Spiritan in a group of three seculars and three religious from another Congregation. We had to come to grips with a very difficult situation, stemming from the unfortunate atmosphere amongst the seminarians and some rather strange decisions emanating from the hierarchy. We spent three years engaged in wrangling and disputes, but we were remarkably united and supportive as a team; a common struggle can often bring strength and coherence to a group when the members have learnt to communicate well with each other. Although on my own as a Spiritan, I felt I could contribute the experience of a forward-looking community and this proved to be very contagious. We created a strong community amongst ourselves with periods of spiritual renewal each month. When we finally resigned en bloc from tis task, convinced that it needed to be approached in a different way, we retained the feeling that we had “fought the good fight” together. I really appreciated this “commando” type of community; it is good, from time to time, to have to face up to such problems together. My extended Spiritan community had to take second place during this period.

I was happy after that to return to the company of Spiritan confreres in a formation community, although things were not easy at that time;



there were problems coming from the political and economic situation and a degree of misunderstanding amongst confreres about the nature of our Spiritan project.

### **As the one in charge**

When I was called to be the superior of the District of Madagascar, I suddenly found myself in a community where I was the youngest, even though I was the one who was ultimately responsible. The situation was further complicated by the fact that I had never worked in the diocese where I was now residing. On more than one occasion I had to keep to myself my disagreement on some of the pastoral and community practices.

One of the burdens of being Superior is that one has to make difficult decisions and transfer confreres without always being able to reveal the reason behind such a move. It is not easy to carry this alone; one's motivation is sometimes judged and condemned by those who cannot be put fully into the picture. So I greatly appreciated the opportunity to reflect on these things with other confreres which came with the twice-yearly meeting of the superiors of the Indian Ocean Region. We always set aside a whole day when we could share the difficulties that are inherent in the necessary discretion that goes with the job. It only lasted a day, but it made all the difference. There were also meetings of the major superiors of the whole island; it was another chance to share the burden of silence that we all carried.

### **Simplicity is the key**

What I have tried to say (rather badly) is probably nothing more than what a whole host of confreres have experienced in their lives as Spiritans. It has taken me 35 years to realise that it is, above all, community life that has formed me as a Spiritan. I always tried to join a new community without any hidden agenda and with that simplicity which is the key to successful community living, at least with the Spiritans. Having experienced community life elsewhere, I have acquired a deeper appreciation of the way we live together in our own

Spiritan family: full of humour, where the tie, the roman collar or refined manners are never the first criteria by which we judge each other; where we know how to laugh at the "slings and arrows" of daily life and to love each other with a manly love. Joseph Lécuyer, our former Superior General, tried to define this distinctive simplicity in his final letter to the Congregation in June, 1974:<sup>1</sup>

*"I see Spiritan simplicity as the refusal to seek any special praise or fame; no spectacular poverty, no tragic and heartrending obedience, no staggering mortification...I have found this with so many Spiritans, many who hardly ever talk about themselves, yet who are ready to accept whatever comes their way, to go wherever they are sent, to share the life of the poor, to take on the most humble jobs without seeing anything extraordinary in it but rather something that is perfectly natural; they radiate peace and joy..."*

It would be difficult to find a more beautiful description of Spiritan community than this!

*Gaby Vuittenez,  
Centre missionnaire Laval,  
57 rue de la Louvière,  
59800 Lille  
France*

---

<sup>1</sup> Bulletin Générale No. 772 (April-June 1974)

# THE EVANGELISATION OF A CHAPLAIN

by William Nugent

*The Maynooth General Chapter referred several times to the inspiration that can come to the missionary from those amongst whom he is sent to live and work: "The presence and action of the Spirit can be discerned in the lives of these people, especially the poor and oppressed".<sup>1</sup> Speaking from long experience, "Willie" Nugent, of the Irish Province, reminds us that "the poor and oppressed" are not just those who are victims of exploitation and injustice, but also those afflicted by mental sickness and alcoholism. He tells us how his life was radically changed when he was appointed to a Dublin psychiatric hospital in 1982, of how his own vocation was stimulated and challenged by the deep faith and courage of people who were suffering a daily crucifixion.*

---

## A "provisional" appointment

My appointment as chaplain to this St. John of God Hospital in Dublin was provisional and accidental. My six year term in St. Mary's College ended in 1981 and when I approached my provincial for a new assignment, he mentioned work in Wales, in California, and in Louisiana and he added that the Spiritan chaplain to the psychiatric hospital, Fr Harry Byrne, wanted to retire. I was then recovering from surgery and under medical advice not to leave the country for six months. Being reluctant to hang around doing nothing for that length of time, I decided to have a go at chaplaincy work. I came here with a certain amount of trepidation, based on the general misconception of what a psychiatric hospital and psychiatric patients are like. But I soon realised that I was in a very enriching pastoral field and now, after 18 years, I thank God for the privilege of having received such an appointment.

---

<sup>1</sup> Maynooth 1998, no. 3.3



This hospital has 200 beds and caters for general psychiatric conditions with two small special units, one for alcoholics and the other for teenagers. Apart from one lock-up admission ward that caters for patients most at risk, the hospital has the appearance of a first class hotel! It does not look like a hospital, it does not have the odour we associate with hospitals, and the patients do not look like patients. In fact, if one were to enter the coffee shop where patients take their visitors, one would find it almost impossible to distinguish who was the patient and who was the visitor.

The majority of the patients suffer from some form of neurosis – they are perfectly sane people with deep emotional problems, like depression or anxiety. Those with psychotic problems, who are to some extent out of touch with reality, are a minority.

### **The mystery of suffering**

The first thing to strike me here was the sheer volume of suffering. I was never in a house where there was so much pain - more than in a general or even a cancer hospital - because mental and psychological pain is far more crucifying than physical suffering. The fact that this illness is not understood and the patient is avoided only adds to the pain. This raises the question of the meaning of suffering and why God allows people, even innocent people, to go through this kind of agony that strips a person of dignity and self-worth and skill, rendering him a burden to himself and to society. And what is the point of this suffering? It would appear at first sight to be the most negative, valueless and purposeless of all human experiences.

I have no intention of searching here for a philosophical or theological explanation of the mystery of suffering, but I would like to point to two positive effects that suffering brings: **it has a humanising and a divinising effect on the vast majority of patients.** My own experience here (and that of my co-chaplains) convinces me of this fact, and most of the patients would also agree.

As I mentioned, this is a house of pain, but it is also a house of great love. By that I mean that there is a great spirit of compassion,

understanding, friendliness and caring that circulates among and between the patients. I have not noticed a love of the same high quality in any other community. And so I asked myself, how come I find such precious human qualities here where people are not supposed to be 'right', when outside there is so much indifference and coldness and selfishness? The only answer I could find is the experience of suffering which they all share. And so suffering, which would appear to be the most negative and useless of human experiences has, for the vast majority of patients, an enhancing and ennobling effect on the human personality. It makes people more understanding, more caring, more sensitive to the needs of others. And this lasts long after the patient has left the hospital.

I soon became aware too that seldom in any other community have I found greater attention, devotion and reverence than among those who attend our liturgies and paraliturgies. Besides that, few patients leave the hospital without being reconciled to God. In and through the dark cloud of psychiatric suffering, in some mysterious way, God finds the human spirit and the human spirit finds God. It reminds me of the words of Oscar Wilde in "The Ballad of Reading Jail":

*"Happy are they whose hearts can break  
And peace and pardon win.  
How else can man make straight his plan  
And purge his soul from sin?  
How else but through a broken heart  
May Lord Christ enter in?"*

### **Inspiration from the patients**

In my early days, I attended a lecture on chaplaincy work in which we were warned to abstain from 'God-talk' when dealing with patients. But I realised very quickly that the vast majority of the patients themselves initiated references to God and to religion. Their readiness to verbalise and discuss their faith with me and with one another continues to surprise and inspire me: their faith in and reliance on

prayer, their Eucharist, and the peace they find in times spent before the Blessed Sacrament; their faith in the healing power of the sacrament of reconciliation to which some would attribute their cure; their faith in the sacrament of the sick which they encourage one another to attend and which they find so helpful and healing; their faith in the peace-bringing presence of a priest and in the power of his blessing. Some have verbally challenged me that my own faith in my priesthood, in my blessings and in the sacraments I administer, is not as strong as it should be; they have encouraged me to deepen my faith.

Some of their comments are humiliating and frightening, as well as challenging. For example, when I asked Maurice, a young man I was trying to help in his struggle with alcoholism, depression and strong suicidal tendencies, what was his concept of God, his answer really threw me: "When I think of God", he replied, "I think of you"! I visited Elizabeth who was deeply depressed and going through a psychotic episode and her greeting to me was: "I was looking for Jesus and you came to me. Are you Jesus?" Such incidents drive home to me what I am called to be for my patients, an alter Christus, whose mission is to bring them something of the presence and love and compassion of Christ and to accompany them as they go through this sorrowful mystery of their lives.

### **Courage in face of trials**

The fortitude with which most of the patients react to a frightening medical diagnosis like schizophrenia, how they gradually come to accept with serenity a condition that will severely handicap them and, to a great extent isolate them for the rest of their lives, never ceases to amaze me. Sometimes their disposition is little short of heroic.

Pierce, whose schizophrenia has brought about the annulment of his marriage and loss of employment, confided: "I thank God each day for my mental illness. It has brought me back to God." Ita once told me, "I thank God that I am an alcoholic. If I were not I would not be the strong person I have become through the spiritual A.A.<sup>1</sup> program and I would not have met all the wonderful people who have become my friends in the A.A. fellowship."



Peter was an alcoholic, a manic depressive and a compulsive gambler. He had been an accountant, but he had lost everything through his addictions. But deep down he was a man of faith and devotion, and the faith and courage with which he faced up to death impressed me very deeply. He died at 8.00 a.m. one Sunday morning. I was with him in St. Michael's hospital, Dunlaoghaire, at 11.00 p.m. the night before when the chaplain brought him viaticum, explaining that it was food for the long journey. As he was making his thanksgiving, I asked him if he was afraid. "Afraid?", he replied. "I know where I am going, I know all my sins are forgiven." I went on to ask if he was in pain. "Pain?" he replied, "The pain of happiness." The reaction of his wife, Alice, whom I went to see just after his death was equally inspiring. "Wasn't God very good to me that I married an alcoholic? When Peter was well he taught me gentleness and kindness and thoughtfulness. He left me with nothing, but he taught me that material things don't count. Only for him I would not be in the A.A. and I would not have the spiritual strength I now have." For me to minister to people of such spiritual calibre is a privilege, an inspiration and a powerful challenge to aspire after a faith and fortitude like theirs.

### **The ministry of the patients**

Watching the patients helping and comforting each other and listening with the greatest patience, interest and concern to one another is for me another source of inspiration. I would even go so far as to say that their recovery comes from this interaction among themselves as much as from the medical treatment they receive. But their ministry to one another has a religious dimension too. They encourage each other to pray, to visit the Blessed Sacrament, to return to the practice of the faith. The vast majority of those who come to me for Confession or for counselling are referred to me by other patients rather than by professionals.

Then there is their ministry to me. At a time when some priests speak of a 'crisis of identity', the patients make it quite clear to me what it means to be a priest and what ministry they expect from him. Besides that, the daily flow of affirmation, appreciation and affection I receive

from them confirms me continually in my priesthood, and makes me increasingly grateful to God for calling me to be his priest for them.

### **Inspiration from recovering alcoholics**

Before I conclude, I would like to say a word about the disease of alcoholism and the appreciation I have gained for that world-wide fellowship that is Alcoholics Anonymous and its program of recovery. The alcoholic unit here is a relatively small section of the hospital but because of my involvement in the programme through the years, I have learned to have the greatest respect for this fellowship and its recovery program, especially its spiritual dimension.

Alcoholism is a widespread disease that affects one out of every ten people who drink. It is a disease that brings intense suffering to the alcoholic person and to the whole family. It is a disease that baffles medical science which has so far failed to identify its exact cause or causes, or to come up with any medical remedy. It is a terminal disease coming, with cancer, in second place after heart-failure as the greatest cause of death. The sufferer is practically incapable of recovering on his/her own. Statistically only 3% can recover without help.

But a road to recovery, called Alcoholics Anonymous, was mapped out by two 'drunks', Bill and Bob, in 1936, and through following their program, million of alcoholics throughout the world are now recovering and living happy, fulfilled and productive lives. In the handbook of the programme, they make the claim that "seldom has it been known that anyone who faithfully followed our path failed to recover." This claim remains unchallenged. In fact, so effective has this program proven to be for alcoholics that others with equally incurable problems have adopted the program and applied it to their particular weakness with equal success - for example Narcotics, Gamblers, Over-eaters Anonymous. There are over 100 such fellowships based on the A.A. program.

They are known as 'self-help groups' but they are really 'God-help-us groups'. The road to recovery is based on two planks - the help of other alcoholics and the help of God. They help one another by

regularly attending meetings where they find acceptance, understanding and support, and where they can verbalise their problems and get encouragement to deal with them. But even at these meetings they profess their dependence on God with their slogans of "*Let go and let God*", and "*Over to God*", etc. Every meeting concludes with the Our Father. They have a saying that three people attended the first A.A. meeting: Bob, Bill and God - and God has not missed a meeting since! They experience a mysterious power in their meetings which I believe is the power of faith.

The programme is directed towards building up spiritual qualities in the human personality - humility, faith, prayer, surrender to God, etc. - and it is so effective that, in my experience, the recovering alcoholic, who seriously tries to implement the program, becomes a far better person than the average human being.

Observing so many alcoholics coming in from the dark night of alcoholism, broken, in despair and far from God, and being gradually transformed into happy, healthy and successful people whose lives are centred on God - all this has been a source of great inspiration to me, and a challenge for me to emulate their surrender to God. When I reflect on the faith, fervour and charity of so many of the patients who pass through this psychiatric hospital, where the medical practitioners are inevitably influenced by the atheistic dimension of modern psychology and psychiatry, I am reminded of the prayer of Jesus:

*"I give thanks to you, Father, Lord of heaven and of earth, for hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them to mere children. Yes, Father, for that is what it has pleased you to do."* (Matt: 6/25)

*Fr. William Nugent c.s.sp.,  
St. John of God Hospital,  
Stillorgan,  
Co. Dublin,  
Ireland*

---

<sup>1</sup> Alcoholics Anonymous



*"People like to present Jesus as the model for Christian action, by showing how he was so uncompromisingly available to all men and women. They often fail to realise that he was only able to be open to all because he was firstly open to God. It was only because he had first exposed himself without restraint to God's love that he was able to be filled with the fullness that he could communicate too others. Without the hidden years, the desert, the lonely garden or the inner room, there could be no compassion for the needy, no love for the loveless, no healing for the sick.*

*To follow him does not mean that we should try and copy him as an artist copies a model. It does not mean that we should merely imitate the outward manifestation of the inner light that burned in him. It means that we must expose ourselves to that self-same light that it may set fire to us as well".*

(Rayner Torkington: "Peter Calvay, Hermit" p. 52).

# THE INSPIRATION OF LAY SPIRITANS

by Joy and Gary Warner

*A married couple, both Lay Spiritans of the Province of TransCanada, speak of what has inspired them in their life as committed lay people.*

**Joy Warner** was born in England and has lived and taught at elementary, high school, college and university levels in France, Sierra Leone and Canada. She has served as National Chair of "The Canadian Voice of Women for Peace" and has worked at the national level with "Development and Peace" and "Project Ploughshares". She is currently co-chair of the Hamilton "10 Days for Global Justice" Committee. She has a certificate in Alternative Dispute Resolution. She has presented briefs to the Canadian Government on Foreign Policy, Immigration, and Disarmament. Joy sits on the Formation/Vocation Committee of the TransCanada Province. She has 4 children and 3 grandchildren.

**Gary Warner** teaches courses in both French and Peace and International Development at McMaster University in Canada. Over the years he has served as a Department Chair, Associate Dean and Director of McMaster International. He is currently a member of the Coordinating Council of the Centre for Peace Studies. He worked in West Africa as Director of the CUSO Sierra Leone program and also chaired CUSO's Board of Directors. He is currently Chair of the Board of Directors of "Settlement and Integration Services Organization" of Hamilton-Wentworth (SISO). He has been active in the community for over 30 years on issues related to international development, anti-racism, human rights and social justice. Gary sits on the Justice and Peace Committee of the TransCanada Province.

---

## Joy Warner

As I look around our apartment, I realize that I have surrounded myself with many of the people and things which nurture and inspire

me. On my bedroom wall are woodcuts by Franz Eichenberg of Dorothy Day, Mahatma Gandhi, and Jesus presiding over a last supper of homeless men. Over my bed hangs a colourful crucifix from El Salvador. In our living room hangs a bead painting, from Oshogbo in Nigeria, of a traditional chief offering a libation. There is also a beautiful Yoruba mask, a First Nation's medicine wheel, a painting of Bobo beach where we spent many happy hours in Sierra Leone and graduation pictures of our four children. The top of the piano is covered with photographs of family and friends. The guitar stands close by - music is a source of great joy to the whole family. In my kitchen is a framed print of Norman Rockwell's "Golden Rule" representing the great richness and diversity of the human family and on the other wall an arpillera from Chile shows a campesino neighbourhood resisting invasion by military police. The dining room contains more photos, this time of my three grand-children, and our lakeside cottage, whose natural beauty is always a source of praise and thanksgiving to God for the splendours of our planet earth. It also houses the closest thing I have to a family altar, the top of a bookshelf with statues of Mary and the Holy Spirit, and some holy cards which I change in keeping with the seasons of the liturgical year.

You might be asking yourself what does this eclectic collection have to do with my life as a lay Spiritan in Canada. Well for me, my sources of inspiration are firstly my family, especially my children who have challenged and stretched me to become less self absorbed, more compassionate, more patient, more forgiving than I would ever have thought possible when I got married 34 years ago. My grandchildren, Ikoro aged 7, Adaku aged 5, and Immanuel aged 2 also inspire me to work for a better future for them and all the children of the world. The first decade of this new Millennium has been declared by the United Nations as a *"Decade for a culture of peace and non-violence for the children of the world"*. I am working to establish a *"Coalition for the Culture of Peace"* in my community here in Hamilton and have spent a lifetime working in the peace movement. I believe it is no coincidence that the Holy Spirit and the Peace movement are both represented by a dove, and the witness of so many Spiritan confreres



working in war-torn areas with refugees and victims of violence is a great source of inspiration to me.

A second important source of inspiration is **the people I have met on my travels** in Africa, Latin America and Europe. In Guatemala, where I travelled with a delegation from "Development and Peace", I met the widows of Conavigua whose husbands, brothers and sons had been tortured and "disappeared" during the long years of civil war. Despite having few material resources they were running day-care centres, offering health and agricultural training programs to rural women, and marketing their beautiful woven handicrafts. I asked how they kept going during the long years of struggle and conflict; Lucia smiled and answered, "Despair is the luxury of the rich." In Sierra Leone it was also the women who inspired me with their good humour, hospitality and commitment to attending the literacy classes at the end of their long days of work in the fields and at home. It was humbling indeed to see them painstakingly writing their names in chalk on their slate boards by the light of an oil lamp for which they had provided the kerosene from their very meagre income.

Ultimately, for me perhaps the greatest source of inspiration is the witness of **people who live lives of near perfect integrity**. What do I mean by integrity? Integrity means consistency between principle and practice. Integrity requires us to treat our faith, our beliefs as ground rules of behaviour and decision-making. It requires us to "walk our talk" and to make decisions consistent with our values, especially our religious values. Jesus - and to a different degree Gandhi and Dorothy Day - were prime example of lives lived with integrity. The gospel message of Jesus was truly the good news for all people, and I believe the power of his great attractiveness to so many followers throughout the ages was that he was consistently "good". Nothing is as compelling as goodness and because it is becoming an increasingly rare commodity today, we are instantly attracted when we meet it.

One other person whom I find enormously inspirational is the Quaker woman known as **"Peace Pilgrim"**. From 1953 to 1981, this silver-haired woman calling herself only "Peace Pilgrim" walked more than

25,000 miles on a personal pilgrimage for peace, carrying in her blue tunic her only possessions. She vowed *"to remain a wanderer until humankind has learned the way of peace, walking until given shelter and fasting until given food."* She crossed North America on foot bearing the simplest of messages: *"This is the way of peace: overcome evil with good, falsehood with truth, and hatred with love"*. She talked about peace among nations, between people, and the most important inner peace. Penniless, walking with no organisational backing, she touched the lives and hearts of countless thousands of Americans. Some were charmed by her simple but cheerful presence; many others were profoundly inspired by her message and her remarkable lifestyle. The following quotation from her booklet *"Steps to Inner Peace"* reveals how vital she considered the principle of integrity:

*"...So I got busy on a very interesting project. This was to live all the good things I believed in. I did not confuse myself by trying to take them all at once, but rather, if I was doing something that I knew I should not be doing, I stopped doing it, and I always made a quick relinquishment. You see, that's the easy way. Tapering off is long and hard. And if I was not doing something that I knew I should be doing, I got busy on that. It took the living quite a while to catch up with the believing, but of course it can, and now if I believe something, I live it. Otherwise it would be perfectly meaningless."*

Finally the witness of **the Spiritan confreres of TransCanada and my fellow lay Spiritans** is a very important source of inspiration. The warm welcome I always receive, the sense of belonging to an international, multicultural global community, the insights shared during our regular home liturgies and the life of our founders (especially Father Libermann who suffered so much hardship and discouragement during his life and yet retained an unshakeable trust in God); all these things continually call me to try harder to live up to the Spiritan charism. I also find much support from the *Spiritan Rule of Life* which is so grounded in reality and yet offers me an ideal to strive for.

Father Libermann himself recognised that integrity or holiness of life was an essential requirement for the missionary: *"Go your way cheerfully, simply, . . . without thought of being well or ill judged, of pleasing or displeasing, without wanting to appear important, to attract people's esteem, or good-will. God alone, have God always in view, and in the course of conversation observe moderation, peace gentleness, not centred too much on yourself. . . Yes, forget yourself as much as you can so that your mind and heart may be taken up with God alone. This is one of the most important things for you"* (L.S.II p.341, 1839). His message, which is so counter-cultural in this age of self-indulgence, materialism and greed, is one of the main reasons I was inspired to make my permanent commitment to the Spiritans last May. Indeed the Spiritan calling - to work with the outcast and the excluded, and to recognise that God's Spirit resides in every human heart and that therefore the whole human family are my brothers and sisters - is the greatest source of inspiration of all.

## Gary Warner

Vincent Donovan reminds us in *The Church in the Midst of Creation* that *"the Gospel begins with God the creator and God's creation. Everything else must flow out of this creation. We know God only in relation to creation and to humankind...The God of revelation is a God who entered into human history, into earth history."* Our lived experiences are an important pathway to encounter God and the sources of inspiration that God provides for our guidance.

As a young student at St. Mary's College, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad, I acquired my first experience of faith-inspired social outreach through the praesidium of the Legion of Mary of which I was a member. One of the activities that was assigned to me was visiting the sick at the General Hospital. This experience nurtured in me a sense of compassion for people who were experiencing pain and suffering in their lives. Shortly after I finished high school, and before I left for university abroad, I was invited by one of the teachers, Mr. Pantin, to join a reflection group which was studying the social teachings of the



Church. In retrospect, both of these experiences served as important sources of formation and inspiration which have had a profound impact on my life as it unfolded.

As a student in France during the first half of the 1960s, I was privileged to know two chaplains in particular who inspired me and made a significant difference in my life. L'abbé Zaire was the chaplain of the *Fédération Antillo-Guyanaise des Etudiants Catholiques* (FAGEC), a national organisation which regrouped Catholic students from several university campuses across France. The FAGEC held an annual congress in Paris at which the theme for the year was debated, resolutions made and an editorial team assembled to publish the reflections emanating from the congress. One year, for example, was devoted to studying the role of the Church in the contemporary social, political and economic context of the French Caribbean "*départements d'outremer*". I realised a few years later in Canada, after I discovered Gustavo Gutierrez' "*The Theology of Liberation*" and was able to name Liberation Theology, that I had in fact had prior exposure through FAGEC to the essence of liberation theology as a Christian expression of solidarity and justice that had a special appeal to people who had experienced the social and economic realities of the Third World. L'abbé Zaire was a charismatic and inspiring leader who deepened our social consciousness as Christian students. An added bond for me was that, at the end of our studies, L'abbé Zaire later married Joy and me at the Eglise St. Julien, the university parish church in Caen, where I had been a student.

I have never forgotten these words of Fr. Gwenael, the Franciscan chaplain of the FAGEC group at the University of Caen, in Normandy: "*When you pray the Our Father and say "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven", it doesn't mean that you fold your arms passively and wish for the coming of the Kingdom; you must be an active agent working in the vineyard.*" The message I took from his words was that we are called upon to be bearers and liver of the "good news" - not the bad news that the poor will always be with us, with the implication that poverty, deprivation and marginalisation are ordained by God - but the good news announced in Isaiah: "*Is not this*

*the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free and to break every yoke?"*

We moved to Canada in 1967 where I took up my appointment at McMaster University in Hamilton. The Dominican priests whom we met during the sabbatical year I spent in Senegal became a source of inspiration for me. Our son was born in Dakar in mid-January 1974 and was baptised at the Eglise Saint Dominique in Dakar where we used to go to church. During our stay in Senegal, we got to know the priests at the Fraternité Saint Dominique quite well. I volunteered there as an English teacher for the youth in the alternative school which they had created. The Fraternité Saint Dominique served both as an outreach centre and as a "*centre de réflexion*". The Centre not only mobilised the parish to learn about and contribute to rural development projects but also engaged the Senegalese students to become themselves directly involved in rural development work. It also organised presentations and discussions. One of the sessions that I remember most vividly was a presentation followed by a discussion on the inculturation of the Church in Africa. I had great admiration for the respectful, dynamic and progressive witness of this Dominican mission in Senegal, a predominantly Muslim country.

One of the people who made the biggest impact on me in the course of my work with CUSO in West Africa was Kossivi Akpalo, Director General of the *Conseil de Gestion Afrique-Togo* (CONGAT), an umbrella Togolese NGO organisation engaged in community development work. I only met Mr. Akpalo 5 or 6 times during my stay in Togo, including at a private dinner during which we had the opportunity to talk at length about our experiences and hopes. Mr. Akpalo probably has no idea what a profound impact he had on me. I was very struck by his deep religious faith which provided the inspiration for the commitment and energy which he gave to his work as the moving force behind the indigenous NGO of which he was the leader. A Catholic, he confided to me that he would occasionally go to a monastery for periods of meditation. It is rare that people working in secular organisations will speak to you about their private motivation. I was privi-

leged to have had access, brief as it was, to this insight which I have never forgotten and which has inspired me to this day.

Because of their vision of creating an inclusive non-racist society and their willingness to risk their lives in pursuit of this dream, I have also been greatly inspired by Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and Bishop Tutu.

Finally, there are the living Spiritan connections that sustain and inspire me. There are the Spiritan chaplains I first met at McMaster University, notable amongst whom was the late Fr. Sean Byron who had the uncanny gift of anticipating your questions and your needs before you articulated them. I have been fortunate, along with Joy, to participate as a helper in the work of the *Volunteer International Christian Service* (VICS) and to be inspired by both its Director, Fr. Dermot Doran, and by the unselfish volunteers of all ages who have chosen to offer their skills overseas through VICS. As Lay Spiritans associated with the TransCanada Province and with an increasingly international order, we have privileged access to the inspiring example of service and holiness exhibited by so many Spiritans around the world as well as to the rich spiritual resources of which the Congregation is the depository.

*Joy and Gary Warner,  
197, Duke Street, Unit 102,  
Hamilton, ON. L8P 4V4  
Canada*



## LIBERMANN'S SOURCES OF INSPIRATION

*For this edition of Spiritan Life, devoted to our "Sources of Inspiration", we thought it would be interesting to look for a testimony from Libermann himself where he explains the secret of his own personal inspiration. The problem is that he very rarely talked about himself and his inner life. But there is one such letter that has survived, even though he gave strict instructions that it should be destroyed after three days! It was written from Rome to Jérôme Schwindenhammer in 1846 and it gives a unique insight into his personal spirituality and inspiration.*

*A few words to explain the context of the letter might be helpful. Jérôme was a novice at La Neuville and Libermann was his novice master. Libermann left the novitiate for several weeks, visiting various seminaries in search of missionary vocations. He then went on to Rome to present his "Mémoire sur les missions des Noirs en générale et sur celle de la Guinée en particulier".*

*Libermann had known Jérôme for over two years already so he was well acquainted with his fixations regarding his prayer life; he was always looking for new ways of prayer from which he expected dramatic changes in his spiritual life. He found it difficult to accept the advice of Libermann, which was full of exhortations to be relaxed and open to the Holy Spirit. He saw his direction as insufficiently demanding for one who wanted to make great strides forward in the spiritual life. Like his brother Ignace, Jérôme had a character which was very rigid and he suffered from scruples to such an extent that he made himself ill. He eventually became suspicious of the guidelines that Libermann was proposing for his spiritual life (this is what Libermann means when he refers to his "temptation" in the letter). In another letter <sup>1</sup>, written two years later, Libermann strongly advised him; "beware of your own spirit and do not cling on to your own ideas; try to develop a suppleness of mind and will and avoid all rigidity and tenacity".*

*In this present letter, in trying to help Jérôme, Libermann goes as far as to drop his habitual reserve in such matters to speak of his own personal experience; he shows that spiritual progress comes as a grace from God and not through relying on our own efforts, as if we could gain apostolic sanctity by force. It is the same as the question raised by St. Paul: does your salvation come from your own acts or from your faith in Jesus?*

*Libermann shared his personal experience on condition that Jérôme kept it to himself. Fortunately, Providence has preserved these secrets for us, so that as we read them 150 years later we can see the convictions which inspired our founder and guided him in his actions:*

- *that all progress in the spiritual life comes from the grace of God. We share in the sanctity of the One who is holy; it is "metaphysically impossible" for us to acquire it simply by our own efforts;*
- *that we must forget about ourselves and generously share all we have and are with others, without counting the cost or worrying about the path that we are asked to follow. Our only concern should be to stay with Him and rely solely on Him;*
- *that in all our apostolic work, we must be convinced that we are no more than a channel of God's grace for others. Nothing is acquired by our own efforts; God gives us everything"*

### **To Jerome Schwindenhammer**

August 3, 1846

Dear Brother,

I understand the temptation that you are going through; it is clearly coming from that state of mind that is causing all your other problems. There is nothing true about it, nor is it even a possibility. Because I am

so anxious to help and support you in these difficult trials that the enemy is making you undergo, I am going to tell you, once more, something about myself but only on condition that you mention it to nobody else. I have already told you what I think about my present state of soul and I am convinced that I told you the truth. But now I want to talk about what happened in the past so as to destroy the underlying cause of your temptation.

I can assure you that I have never based any of my prayers on a meditation of the virtues, not even the virtues of Jesus and Mary. At the end of my prayers, I have never taken a resolution to practice any of the virtues. Neither have I ever been able to reflect on the virtues with a view to deciding what I should do or teach. Sometimes, I put this down to the shakiness of my nervous system, at others to my natural limitations. At the same time, I am aware that my spirit has acquired a certain strength and refinement and that my judgement has developed a greater balance; but without any doubt, it is nothing but grace that has created what did not previously exist, that has strengthened what was weak and repaired what was defective. This is so true and clear to me that even if I lost my faith, I could never deny the presence and action of grace in my soul.

Whenever I talked about virtues and perfection, it was never the result of a meditation I had made beforehand; it was while I was talking that the truths became clear to me, sorted themselves out and developed in my mind. At such moments, I felt as though a light was shining into my soul and a force was giving strength to my will; but these feelings left me again as soon as I stopped talking. This convinced me that God was giving me this grace for others, and I was fearful for my own salvation. But I had no doubt that God would have pity on me.

In short, I acquired nothing by my own efforts, neither knowledge, nor strength of will nor the practise of the virtues. God gave me everything. Without asking my permission, he dragged me to himself with a violence that I have never seen happen to any other person. At first I was very slack and indifferent, with no interest at all in the supernatural life. Our Lord gave me the grace to resist my father who wanted to



take me away from the faith; I renounced him rather than the faith. Once this was done, the Master, to my amazement, came and dragged me out of myself, completely capturing and absorbing my faculties for about five years. During that time, I had no thought of working on one virtue or another; my only concern was to be with him and that was the easiest thing in the world. Throughout that whole period, I had no clear idea about spiritual things.

That is enough, I think, to convince you that your temptation because of me has no foundation. You see how Jesus acts and does everything in our souls. It is metaphysically impossible for somebody to acquire a supernatural virtue by his own efforts. I suppose one could always pretend, but to really succeed, it would be impossible.

There is no harm in discussing spirituality with Mr. Plantaz, but do not correct him unless he asks you to do so. Never deliberately decide to probe his interior life and dispositions. When he asks you what you think, tell him what occurs to you at the moment. You are quite right in not wanting any recognition from others; I share the same conviction.

Go to communion twice a week as well as Sundays. Try to forget about yourself at all times. Do everything with a calm simplicity, putting your trust in God and Mary. As long as you keep trying to do things on your own, you will come up against these sort of temptations. You should try to use them as a way of overcoming yourself, making sure that they do not leave a lasting impression on your feelings, your imagination or on the way you behave. Once you get down to work, you will find that things will go better.

Yours in Jesus and Mary,

F. Libermann

P.S. You will burn this letter three days after you receive it<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> N.D. X – pp. 237-241

<sup>2</sup> The original of this letter is to be found in *Notes et Documents* VIII pp. 202-204

## IN A COUNTRY DIVIDED BY WAR

by Bernardo Bongo

*Bernardo Bongo was appointed the first Provincial of the newly created Spiritan Province of Angola in 1977. Having completed his second mandate as Provincial, Bernardo went to Strasbourg, where he had decided to take a well-deserved time of renewal. As he explains in this article, it was there that the idea matured of sharing as a priest and missionary in the suffering and isolation of those people of his country who were forced to flee to an unknown region, leaving behind all their relations and possessions. It was a difficult experience that he underwent in that area which he himself refers to as "the end of the world". His tenacity and missionary courage at the side of an abandoned people gave hope to a small, fragile community which before his arrival was almost without any pastoral guidance. In 1992, he was elected to the General Council of the Congregation at the General Chapter of Itaici. In 1998, he returned to Angola and is now responsible for a centre of formation for catechists in the Archdiocese of Lobango.*

---

### Angola on the World Scene

In the last 30 years, there is surely no country in the world that has had as many so-called "peace agreements" as Angola, and yet it is still far away from any genuine peace. International interests tend to collide at the weakest intersection points and it is the ordinary people who suffer, die, or remain deeply scared.

Next year, 2001, it will be 40 years since the beginning of this conflict in 1961. Yet it continues to make the ordinary people its principle prisoner and victim; it is still the same conflict and the same Angolan people who are suffering. The Holocaust repeats itself daily; death continues to harvest human lives and the suffering of the people goes on. There is still no end in sight.

## A challenge for the Province

The first Chapter of the new Spiritan Province of Angola took place in Huambo in March, 1980. At this point the anguish of the situation was already being felt. Some of our Christians found themselves being persecuted by the Marxist ideology that ruled in the towns, others were lost in the 'bush' without any pastoral or moral support. The Provincial Chapter confronted the situation (admittedly rather timidly, because it was dangerous to speak too loud). The Chapter document had this to say:

*"Today we live in a situation, the result of historical events, which has brought about the departure of a large number of missionaries and of a war which curtails our apostolic activity to a great extent. The Christian communities are shaken by the winds of new ideologies which have spread throughout the country by many means. The insecurity of the situation has forced a huge number of people to abandon their homes and goods in order to seek places of greater security. Many were forced to emigrate to the coffee-growing areas, others to take refuge in the suburbs of the larger cities as well as other places. Many families suffered greatly - in detention, from prolonged absences from their families, and from a complete lack of moral and material support. The missionary must be attentive to these realities, and be present and available to all with serenity and optimism, bringing a message of hope to the people in the name of Christ".*

## In search of the "lost sheep"

When the Chapter was over, which had spoken eloquently of the situation of so many Christians lost in the silence of the forests, a confrere came to me and asked to be able to follow those "lost sheep" who had nobody to look after them. I told him that no superior would send a person into such a dangerous and uncertain world. I think it was on that very day that I myself felt the call to go some day to give this message of hope to those lost in the bush, in keeping with what had been said in the Chapter documents.



From October 1983 to March 1984 I was in Strasbourg for a period of recyclage and this gave me the opportunity to think in greater depth and calmness of mind about the idea. I informed the Superior General and his assistant of a possible plan to go into these forests. The reply was that “the Congregation is not sending you, but we don’t disapprove”.

### **The frightening reality**

It is easy to talk and write about “mission in a situation of risk” or “evangelisation in frontier situations”, but the reality is something else, when you have to run that physical risk each day and live with facile and calumnious judgements, even being accused of involvement in party politics. Maybe the risk is less when one is an overseas missionary, but I have several confreres who sacrificed their lives for the people of Angola and in this way witnessed to the truth in a country torn apart by war.

I spent seven years in this “land at the end of the earth”; this was a phrase used by some journalists in the 70s and 80s to describe the areas occupied and governed by the opposition military movement called “Unita”. The capital of these lands was Jamba with about 25,000 inhabitants and the whole territory covered one third of Angola. Our missionary task was to witness to the truth in that vast area. The other missionaries that I met in Jamba at that time deserve great praise; only God and history can truly describe and reward their dedication and sacrifices. Even though it was the absurdities of war that forced these missionaries into these places, when they saw the sufferings and the needs of the people, they decided to stay and set up their tent amongst them because they were totally lacking in any sort of pastoral care.

In a time of war it is necessary to distance oneself from rumours which create fear and dig trenches of division between families and between people of the same religious creed. To witness to the truth, we must force ourselves to go beyond prejudices – national, regional or racial – and be able to see the other as the image and likeness of God our Father, in whom we are all brothers and sisters of each other.

## **Searching for peace**

Eventually, I thought it would be better to put the Holy See in the picture, so I sent a personal letter to the Secretary of State at the Vatican, making it clear that my option was not political but missionary. The Holy See took the issue seriously and in 1985 I was called to Rome where I presented reports on the pastoral work of the eight priests and five religious in the areas of evangelisation, education and healthcare.

The Church never supported the war, nor was she ever involved in party politics, even though this accusation was made by those not well-intentioned, including some Christians. This policy, which can be backed up by clear documentation, was maintained throughout the seven years that I remained in the area around Jamba. During that time, on four occasions I went to Europe and several of our documents went to authorities who we hoped could intervene in the 'Angolan Question'. We were always attentive to the pronouncements of CEAST (The Episcopal Conference of Angola) and we let the neighbouring authorities know that the Catholic Church was ready to mediate in the Angolan Conflict as soon as the time was right and there was a convergence in the interests of the world political blocks and those of the national political parties. During this period, I had personal meetings with several Heads of State and Church leaders in an attempt to help progress towards peace.

## **The peace of the Spirit**

One day, a friend approached me and warned me that I really was not cut out to be a politician because I spoke too frankly; I was told that the diplomatic corps does not take kindly to that kind of talk! But the Angolan question is so crucial that it cannot put up with little secret whisperings while the people suffer and die under the silent watchful eye of those who are responsible at national and international level. The Angolan people continue to pray, but peace is so slow in coming.

All war is absurd and the war in Angola is certainly no exception. Peace remains the greatest challenge of evangelisation in this time and

John Paul II, in his message "The Year 2000", tells us that work for the peace of nations is one of the missionary priorities of our day. For this to happen, we must enter into the dynamic of responding to the appeals of the Holy Spirit, for it is only through his surprises that the face of the earth, Angola included, can be renewed.

We appeal to you, our brothers, to help us along the road that leads to true reconciliation.

*Bernardo Bongo c.s.sp.,  
Missão Católica da Huila,  
C.P. 122 – HUILA,  
Angola*



*"In the different forms of life inspired by the Spirit throughout history, consecrated persons discover that the more they stand at the foot of the cross of Christ, the more immediately and profoundly they experience the truth of God who is love. It is precisely on the Cross that the One who in death appears to human eyes as disfigured and without beauty, fully reveals the beauty and power of God's love...The consecrated life reflects the splendour of this love because, by its fidelity to the mystery of the Cross, it confesses that it believes and lives by the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In this way, it helps the Church to remember that the Cross is the superabundance of God's love poured out upon the world, and that it is the great sign of Christ's saving presence, especially in the midst of difficulties and trials. This is the testimony given constantly and with deeply admirable courage by a great number of consecrated persons, many of whom live in difficult situations, even suffering persecution and martyrdom"*

(Vita Consecrata no. 24)

## A JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS

by Daniel Osei-Yeboah

*Few confreres can have had such a difficult start to their missionary life as Daniel. Born in Ghana in 1959, he made his profession in the West African Foundation, was ordained priest in 1992 and left immediately for his first appointment to the District of Sierra Leone, just as the country was beginning to be torn apart by the anarchy that had broken out in neighbouring Liberia. After a period as catholic youth chaplain and parish priest, he was elected District Superior of Sierra Leone in April 1996, a ministry that he is fulfilling to this day. Throughout this time, Sierra Leone has been going through a purgatory of unimaginable brutality that has no parallel in modern times. Daniel himself has had his share of the mindless violence and constant fear that are the lot of the poor people of the country, both in Freetown and on his travels to visit the scattered confreres of the District. We are most grateful for this short account of his experiences and of the inspiration that sustained him during such a deadful time.*

---

Like Abraham, our Father in the faith who had to leave his homeland, property and loved ones to go to an unknown destination, I began my missionary journey to Sierra Leone in 1992, a country that was just beginning to suffer at the hands of rebel insurgents.

### A country of contradictions

Sierra Leone is a small country with approximately four million people. It is also a unique country with unique happenings: five different governments in less than eight years, rich in mineral resources yet one of the poorest places in the world, the one-time "Athens" of Africa which now has one of the lowest literacy rates in that continent. All this is the direct result of gross economic, political and social decadence.

And this is the nation that has been wrenched apart by one of the most ghastly and spiteful civil conflicts ever perceived in our human history. Since 1991, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), led by a one time army corporal, Foday Sankoh, has taken up arms to fight not only civilian and military governments but also ordinary innocent civilians. The nefarious activities of the RUF have rightly earned them a bad name. Their record is so bad that one cannot but abhor them. This group is no respecter of human rights. Children and adults are forcibly conscripted to join them and they terrorise both innocent civilians and foreign nationals. On March 12<sup>th</sup> 1994, an Irish Spiritan, Fr. Felim McAllister, together with a medical doctor and his family, were killed while trying to escape from the rebels. The rebels in their campaign of terror kill people who refuse to accept them and resort to looting, raping women and young girls, destruction of villages and property, and arbitrary mutilation of civilians - often severing hands or legs.

The will and determination of the people to reject these rebels and their inhuman treatment deserves the highest commendation. They look to the international community, the West African Sub-Region and the Church to help them attain that liberation and peace which has eluded them for so many years.

**My sources of inspiration** are probably no different from what others have experienced yet the context may be a bit different. For the past eight years, I have lived and worked in Sierra Leone; it is a short period yet so full of memories. The journey to the 'unknown' through the wilderness has been dangerous and turbulent, yet "the Lord of the storm" has now almost brought us to the shore - worn out, traumatised, but with a smile for we know we were never really alone. His words have become so real for us; *"I am with you till the end of time"*.

### ❖ **The strength that comes from Scripture**

As with Abraham, it is a call to discipleship that drives us into the unknown. Many a time when the rebel war intensified, when clergy, religious and civilians were threatened by imminent death and when the life of some people was taken away with impunity, I abandoned myself totally into the hands of God. I had my own 'baptism of fire' at



the hands of rebels on the 9<sup>th</sup> January 1999. Around 4 in the morning, some rebels broke into my residence. There was no way to escape except to run and take shelter inside the church. On that same day at about 5 in the evening, another batch of rebels visited me and this time, they were desperate and unfriendly. I was severely beaten and held at gunpoint and they said they were going to kill me. At this stage, all I could say was "*Jesus save me!*" And that was how I narrowly escaped death.

Our journey through the wilderness is also like that of Moses and the Israelites: the people have lost hope of ever achieving lasting peace and security. They are constantly asking, "*why does God allow us to suffer under these rebels and other warring factions?*" They are not just lacking basic necessities like pipe-borne water, food, clothing, medicine and shelter; every day, desperate displaced and poor people knock at my door for spiritual, moral and material support. I can do nothing for most of them. Like the Israelites, some say they would have preferred to die in their towns and villages rather than in Free-town. Sometimes, I find myself praying that manna will come down from heaven - and this sometimes happens, thanks to many benefactors and benefactresses who have supported us, giving a helping hand to those most in need during those critical times.

### ❖ Lessons from the laity

Little did I realise that the laity have a lot more to offer me than I have to give them. They taught me to move from theory into practice, from the world of dreams to the world of reality. I heard many people say, "*Father, I have lost everything but, thank God, I have my life.*" - and here am I, with my vow of poverty and training in the spirit of detachment, who can't stop thinking about all the things that the rebels have taken from me!

While I have been writing this article, two rebels have come to see me; they needed money to buy medicine. One of them asked for prayers for the atrocities he and others had done during the rebel war in Sierra Leone. He is being haunted by the acts committed and, as a result, he

cannot sleep at night. I promised to pray for him but also advised him to stop his involvement in the war.

On one occasion, a young man met the rebel who had amputated his left hand. For some time, neither could utter a word; they just looked at each other. The rebel then broke the silence and started begging for mercy. The mob began to beat him but the young man shouted, "*Please, leave him alone - I have forgiven him!*" This was a real challenge to me. I must also learn to forgive those who hurt me. This will be my approach to my confreres who do not get on well with me or offend me.

The lay people, having been let down by the Government and the National Army, ran to the church for consolation and strength - while Government Ministers, Diplomats, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO's) and those who could afford it sought refuge outside the country. In the heat of rebel activities the laity were encouraged and had a sense of hope through our presence. The shepherd has to lay down his life for his flock and, where necessary, die with them. I tried to put into practice this difficult teaching of Jesus and the challenge of self-giving. In those crucial times we had nothing to show or offer the people, yet I believe our presence was "a morale booster". One young girl said to me, "*Father I thought you had run away!... thanks for sharing our suffering with us. We feel encouraged to see you.*"

### ❖ Inspiration from our Congregation

One of my greatest sources of inspiration has emanated from our Congregation. The teachings and guidelines handed on to us by our founders have sustained us all. Our motto, "*One Heart and One Soul*", has been the life-line linking me to the other confreres throughout the world. During those critical moments of the rebel insurgencies, confreres all over the world prayed for us. They shared in our sufferings and supported us financially. This form of solidarity gave me courage and determination to stay on, even when the going became rough and dangerous.

My role as a leader of the confreres here also motivated me to stay. I

had to visit Spiritans who were cut off from the capital, Freetown. Throughout my travels by road, I constantly came into contact with rebels and other groups who were manning roadblocks. They demanded money, but also religious items like rosaries, bibles and prayers. They too need God, the Church and people who will listen to them and accept them. In one of the ambushes I ran into, one of the rebels told his group; "*This is a priest, let him go!*". Wearing my habit during these travels helped me a lot!

Sharing in community life, prayer life and a conscious effort to live my vows have all added strength and inspiration.

This journey through the wilderness has also been a blessing; it will help me to live a better missionary life in future. It has been a real training ground.

*Daniel Osei-Yeboah, CSSp  
St. Martin de Porres Parish,  
PMB 563,  
Freetown,  
Sierra Leone*



*"In the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them. And such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. Scripture verifies in the most perfect way the words: "The Word of God is living and active" (Hebrews 4.12)"*

(Vatican II "Dei Verbum", no. 21).

## AN EXPERIENCE OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

by Michel de Verteuil

*Fr Michel de Verteuil is a native of Trinidad and a member of the Trinidadian Province. He did his secular and philosophical studies in Ireland and his theological studies at the Catholic University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Ordained in 1959, his first appointment was to Nigeria. After four years he was assigned to Trinidad and became the rector of the Regional Seminary of St John Vianney. In 1979, he founded the Archdiocesan Pastoral Centre as a centre for lay theological formation and has been its director ever since. From 1979 to 1991 he was provincial superior of the Trinidadian Province. Since 1991 he has been editor of the archdiocesan weekly, the "Catholic News".*

*He lectures widely on Lectio Divina both in the Caribbean and other parts of the world. In this article, he shares with us how this form of prayer and spirituality has been a source of inspiration for himself and countless others.*

---

I came upon *Lectio Divina* when I went full time into lay theological education, having completed twelve years of teaching theology in a seminary. I thought at first I was merely changing students - laity rather than seminarians - and setting - the parish rather than the classroom. I soon realised however that I needed to use a teaching method which was totally different from what I followed in the seminary. The people I was teaching were not very interested in doctrine but rather in how to live creatively in their world - to be good parents, teachers, neighbours, friends, leaders in their Church communities. In any case many of them did not have secondary, far less tertiary, education and found it difficult to grasp abstract concepts.

They were happy to have me, of course, but what I was teaching was not making much difference to their lives. Besides, I was gone after a few sessions, leaving them with very little to hold on to. I gradually became aware that the method I was looking for was already there in

our Catholic tradition – *Lectio Divina* – the dominant theological method in the Church for its first seven centuries. It had been dormant for several centuries but it was now being practised in many parts of the world. The name was not always used but the substance was there.

## The Method

The basic principle of *Lectio Divina* is that bible reading is a personal encounter with God, a communion which resembles (though different from) the communion of the Eucharist. This goes against what has prevailed in our Church for some centuries. The text has been seen as containing a message, doctrinal or moral; once we get the message, the text has achieved its purpose. In *Lectio Divina*, we love the text, linger over it, read it over and over, let it remain with us.

Once we approach the text in this way, we come face to face with the fact that it speaks to the imagination. A bible text is not like a textbook or a newspaper, providing us with objective information. It was not written like that. It stirs up feelings. We find ourselves identifying with the characters, feel for them, admire or dislike them. We are caught up in the movement of the text, its suspense, its dramatic reversals of fortune, its unanswered questions.

Gradually we “recognise” the text; we find that we have lived the sequence of events ourselves or have seen them lived in others who have touched our lives – for good or for ill. Reading the text becomes a homecoming – and a lifting up. We find ourselves caught up in the story of God’s people, “*fellow citizens with the saints*” (Eph 2, 19); we are the lowly ones whom God “*lifts up from the dust and sets in the company of princes, yes the princes of His people*” (psalm 113, 7-8).

*Lectio Divina*, like all imaginative communication, especially story telling, teaches not directly but by changing the consciousness of those who practice it. By identifying ourselves with God’s people – Jesus, the prophets and great men and women of the Old and New Testaments – we find ourselves adopting their attitudes. We also recognise our-



selves in the bad characters of the text - the Pharisees, Pharaoh, the apostles when they were jealous of each other – and find that we want to give up those attitudes.

The Bible, recognised as coinciding with our experience, reveals to us the truth about life - not abstract truth, but an ideal we hunger and thirst for and, from another perspective, an evil we recoil from. In the bible text, therefore, we discover the double reality of every human person – a story of sin and a story of grace. They are not equally true however. The story of grace is the deep truth of the person, their “true name”, the wheat which God will gather into his barn; sin is the chaff that will be burnt in a fire that never goes out (cf. Mt 3, 12).

*Lectio* blossoms spontaneously into prayer in three dimensions

- thanksgiving that Jesus is alive in the story of grace,
- humility that the story of sin is alive
- petition that the story of grace will prevail, - “*Come Lord Jesus!*”

In *Lectio Divina* we experience the true meaning of theology - entering through bible reading into the wisdom of God or, more accurately, allowing God-alive-in-the-Bible to lead us into his wisdom, humbly, gratefully, and with awe, like St Paul on the road to Damascus. The wisdom of God gives us His perspective on every aspect of life: one-to-one relationships but also economics, politics, agriculture etc.

*Lectio Divina* is best taught and practised with the Church’s Sunday lectionary as it was reformed after the Second Vatican Council. It has its shortcomings, but over all it is a wonderfully constructed three-year programme in Bible reading. By being faithful to the lectionary in this way, we experience ourselves in communion with the Church and, through the Church, with all humanity, sharing in the grace and the sin of our contemporaries. We can say of Bible reading what St Paul says of the Eucharist: “*we, though many, form one body because we partake of the one bread*” (1 Corinthians 10, 17).

## Theological Education

*Lectio Divina* has taught me what theological education is all about - walking with people and discovering with them their story of grace, their greatness, their sacredness, seeing with them that where they live is a holy place. It may be a ghetto area, looked down on by the rest of society; they recognise Jesus living among them. This is tremendously important because our culture (including our preaching, unfortunately) gives our Caribbean people, especially the poor, a negative image of themselves. Through *Lectio* they enter into their holy truth.

As a teacher, I discover with them that the story of grace was lived by their ancestors too, which in the Caribbean means mainly African and Asian ancestors. Here again this is tremendously important. The theology of the past few centuries has taught our Caribbean people to look down on their ancestors. Now through *Lectio Divina* they are recovering the theology of the Church of the first centuries when Romans, Gauls, Celts and Slavs experienced their faith in Jesus as the fulfilment of what was greatest and noblest in their history. For the first time in their history as members of the Church, they are learning to celebrate the faith of their ancestors in the manner of Hebrews 11.

The fact that they follow the lectionary means that the people have a theological text at hand at very little cost. They gradually get the sense that the Church is theirs; it does not belong to the priest or to the experts. This again is "very good news" ("evangelisation") because in cultures like ours, the Church is the only place where they experience their dignity and creativity. Everywhere else they are treated as inferior, even as children, and foolish ones at that!

## Trust in the Spirit

When I have done my introductory sessions I leave them to continue on their own. I encourage them to trust in themselves, in the Bible and in the method of *Lectio Divina*. They will need books, commentaries, charts etc, but not too many and certainly none that will make them feel inferior or "disadvantaged" in any way. We academic theologians

worry and fret about having so many texts and yet few are needed, indeed only one – the Bible (cf. Luke 10,41).

Of course they will need a refresher course from time to time; the culture of passivity which surrounds them (often in the Church too) tends to stifle their creativity and their self-confidence. Wherever I have worked I have tried to form a group of “Lectio Leaders” who serve as “consultants” to groups – and know when to leave them alone!

Vatican documents sometimes speak of the need to protect the people from erroneous interpretations. I can't say I have ever found that a problem. I have learnt to trust the community or rather the Holy Spirit at work within them. Often, because of my experience, I bring an insight which did not occur to them, but quite often too they give me one I never thought of. The highest experience of *Lectio Divina* is when I, like Jesus, can rejoice that the Father has hidden the meaning of a text from myself, the learned one, and revealed it to one whom I had considered a mere child. I have experienced how marginalised groups (women, those with little education, single parents etc.) look at life and I have learnt much from them.

Nearly every group will include members who are self-righteous or fanatical or fundamentalist. Occasionally they are so disruptive that they have to be asked to leave. Usually however the group corrects itself. I often made the mistake of intervening too early; they would have corrected themselves if I had given them the chance.

I make use of the historico-critical method but only to suggest different ways in which the text corresponds to their life experience - always the basis for interpreting the text. Never in my 20 years of teaching *Lectio Divina* have I had the experience of a text which did not come alive for the community.

## **Personal Use**

Though I came to *Lectio Divina* through lay theological formation, experience has taught me that it is a powerful instrument of renewal for priests as well. It has affected my personal life very deeply, and has



helped me to attack many of the weaknesses of the priestly culture. For example, it does away with the compartmentalisation which has been so harmful to us priests. I can now understand why in the first centuries of the Church, when *Lectio* was the dominant method, the same people were theologians, pastors, preachers, mystics and bible scholars all in one.

I make no distinction in my personal life between bible study, preparing sermons, spiritual reading and personal prayer including contemplation. I find they all flow into one another. Similarly I make no distinction in my ministry between giving a course in *Lectio Divina* and giving a retreat, even a directed retreat. If I am asked to give a retreat, I do it in the form of *Lectio Divina*: if I give a course in *Lectio Divina*, I see it as a retreat.

Every Tuesday morning I do *Lectio* with a group of ten or twelve fellow priests, a religious sister and two lay women for an hour and a half. We spend the first half-hour looking back on the previous Sunday's homily. What did it do for us personally? Did it move us? Did we enjoy it? We then move on to prepare the following Sunday's homily together. We disagree, become impatient with one another, question one another's interpretations, but we always try to be totally honest and speak only from personal experience. For all of us, the meetings are an occasion for doing theology, growing spiritually, preparing sermons – and becoming friends.

I teach *Lectio Divina* mainly in local communities, especially in poor areas, but I also do it with priests and religious – and once with bishops. I have learnt that everyone can do *Lectio Divina*, no matter what is his or her situation, standard of education, or status. In every group some are very good at it and others find it difficult. The two determining factors are being free and being honest.

## Church Renewal

Pope John Paul in "Tertio Millenio Adveniente" asked the question: "To what extent has the Word of God become more fully the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living as "Dei

*Verbum*" sought?" (no.36). My answer to that question would be - only to a small extent. Bible reading in our Church is still too much of a head-exercise, a support for doctrinal and moral positions. The "Catechism of the Catholic Church" is one of the worst offenders in this respect. I find that *Lectio Divina* groups have to struggle against the contemporary dominant culture of the Church in order to remain faithful to the method.

When I meet and read about the many men and women who are engaged in the pastoral biblical apostolate, I feel confident that the will of the Vatican Council expressed in "*Dei Verbum*" will prevail and that bible reading will indeed become the soul of theology and the inspiration of the whole of Christian living. I am happy to have been, in a small way, part of this historical movement.

*Michel de Verteuil.*

*2, Carmody Road,*

*St. Augustine,*

*Trinidad,*

*West Indies*

Michel de Verteuil is the author of several booklets on *Lectio Divina*:

*"Your Word is a Light for My Steps"* and *"Meditating on the Mysteries"* (Veritas, Dublin); *"Let All the Peoples Praise Him"* and *"Gospel Meditations for Advent and Lent"* (Columba Press, Dublin).

*"A holy-minded man of good renown  
 There was, and poor, the Parson of a town,  
 Yet he was rich in holy thought and work.  
 He also was a learned man, a clerk,  
 Who truly knew Christ's gospel and would  
 preach it  
 Devoutly to parishioners, and teach it....  
 Wide was his parish, with houses far asunder,  
 Yet he neglected not in rain or thunder,  
 In sickness or in grief to pay a call  
 On the remotest, whether great or small,  
 Upon his feet and in his hand, a stave.  
 This noble example to his sheep he gave,  
 First following the word before he taught it,  
 And it was from the Gospel he had caught it...  
 For if a priest be foul in whom we trust  
 No wonder that a common man should rust;  
 And shame it is to see (let priests take stock)  
 A shitten shepherd and a snowy flock!"*

(Geoffrey Chaucer: "The Canterbury  
 Tales" c. 1390)



## THE JOY OF WITNESSING TO THE GOSPEL

Pierre Schouver

*We are very grateful to Pierre Schouver for contributing this reflection on the preceding articles. He needs little introduction. Pierre was born in 1936 in the village of Meisenthal in the Lorraine district of France. After his novitiate at Cellule from 1954-1955, he spent many years of study in Rome, interrupted by military service in Germany and Algeria. After his ordination in 1964, he taught theology at Chevilly for seven years until he was appointed to the Central African Republic in 1975. In 1988 he was elected Principal Superior of the District of Bangui and in 1992, at the General Chapter of Itaici, Brazil, he was elected the 22<sup>nd</sup> Superior General of our Congregation.*

---

The testimonies that have been gathered for this edition of *Spiritan Life* cannot leave us unaffected. In them we hear an echo of the joys and the activities that so many of us Spiritans have experienced. The Maynooth Chapter spoke of “*some confreres who seem to have lost their enthusiasm for mission*”, but those writing here show us the light that the Gospel has made to shine in their lives, for themselves and for others. It is worth thinking about the experiences they relate in order to find the secret that lies behind them.

### **Lived experience – the field where the treasure is hidden**

Goethe once said, “*Theory is colourless while the tree of life is still green!*”. All the contributions in this edition are based on lived experience. Most likely, in the past, Spiritans would have put much more emphasis on expressions of faith and theological convictions when trying to explain what lies behind their commitment. Naturally, these still retain their importance; for example, as beacons of mutual recognition amongst the different ways in which Christian life ex-

presses itself, or as solid points of anchorage in moments of trial and darkness, just like a ship will tie up to a safe quay until the storm blows itself out.

But these basic reference points are no longer passed on in an automatic way. They were part of a solidly established Church which was the soul of society and the foundation of all our values. Today, in societies which are increasingly coming into contact with other cultures and religions, which are diversified and secularised to a greater or lesser degree, this inheritance of the certitudes of the spirit and the "habits of the heart" seems to have lost much of its attraction and many people no longer seek to obtain it.

To find this treasure once again and to appreciate its true worth, we must dig in the field of the concrete experiences of our lives, inspired by the spirit of Jesus. The mementos that Joy Warner has scattered around her apartment are symbols of what we were trying to do in recent Chapters. Confreres presented us with little sketches from their lives of things that they found significant. These experiences can have a hidden energy for us, rather like the sacraments which according to St. Thomas Aquinas, have an effective force through their signs.

The confreres and lay people who have told us about their sources of inspiration are not denying that great source which is the Church, with the Bible, the liturgy, its teaching and its institutions. All this regains its special value for those who come to it through their own personal journeys. This is the way that Jesus and his disciples lived out their lives and their mission. It is also the way that the New Testament passes on their witness to us.

The article of **Michel de Vertueil** also looks at things from this perspective. Since the earliest times, "Lectio Divina" has been a key for opening up the treasures of the Scriptures. While being attentive to the personal expressions of faith coming from the past, it sees itself as being very much in line with our contemporary mentality, constantly searching for concrete experiences and for the freedom to investigate as individuals and communities.

### The contribution from Lay Members

As lay people, Joy and Gary Warner did not follow the well-trodden paths of our formation houses and our networks of circumscriptions and communities. But they have still found inspiration in our tradition and in the witness of some Spiritans they have met and with whom they have collaborated.

It is not a new thing to have lay people working closely with us, but it is now developing under the form of Lay Associates or of people who are looking for a new breath of life in the *Fraternités Spiritaines*. Sometimes a very close communion can emerge even when Spiritans are working with non Christians in the service of the poor.

Pope John Paul's Apostolic Exhortation on consecrated life sees these new developments as a force for the renewal of religious life: "*Many Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with the laity. The laity are therefore invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes (VC 54)...The participation of the laity often brings unexpected and rich insights into certain aspects of the charism, leading to a more spiritual interpretation of it and helping to draw from it directions for new activities in the apostolate*" (VC 55).

The older ones amongst us were not trained to examine and interpret our personal experiences. We were given a systematic training to prepare us to teach the truths of the faith, from which flowed the rules of Christian life. Our recent General Chapters have turned us rather towards a mission of presence and dialogue. We realise that the Spirit of the Lord has already been at work in people before our arrival on the scene, so our handing on of the Good News takes the form of a sharing, where we are evangelised at the same time as they are.

Quite often, the life we lead in our institutions tends to distance us from the sort of life people normally lead and makes us less exposed to the changes going on in the society around us. After Vatican II, in our desire to compensate for this handicap and make ourselves more open to the world, we have sometimes been rather naïve in the new commitments we have taken on.



It is in this whole area that lay people can be such a help to us with their experience. Through the demands of their family, social and professional lives, they have acquired an evangelical wisdom that can be a great blessing for us. We can help each other in this way because the diversity of situations allows us to see things with greater clarity. It is just one of many ways in which the different types of lives that we lead can become a special grace. As Michel de Certeau put it so well in "*L'Union dans la Difference*", it the difference between things that helps us to understand them. It is also what unites us, because difference is a condition for love.

### **A beautiful motto that is also a challenge**

In the past, some young Spiritans wrote to their former Director in the Scholasticate, complaining that he had deceived them in praising the supportive community life that they would find on the missions. What is the situation today? **Gaby Vuittenez** gives us a good picture of the present reality while admitting the good fortune he had with his own first appointment. It was this that helped him to accept life in some of the subsequent communities that he found less stimulating. When widely differing temperaments are brought together in one community, a genuine openness to each other and a common commitment to the missionary work in hand can make a reality out of our motto "*Cor Unum et Anima Una*".

He underlines the importance of that transparent honesty which alone makes fraternal correction a possibility. Our community must be a place where we continue to be purified and grow together so that we can be more enlightened by the Gospel and thus be better witnesses to it. Friendly and honest communication is all the more necessary in this time of greater personal freedom.

In recent years, the whole Congregation has renewed its conviction of the value and necessity of fraternal life in our communities and circumscriptions. But it is not enough simply to remind ourselves of the principles involved and to set up the necessary structures: nothing can replace a personal initiation into the reality and an experience of

*"how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live together in harmony".* We have to pay more attention to the quality of community life that is offered to young confreres on their first appointment. A positive and encouraging experience will give concrete expression to the principles they have learnt and will help them deal with different situations in the future.

The challenge and opportunity that we face today is to make communities out of individuals who relish their freedom and their liberty to criticise and who nearly always come from different cultural backgrounds. The choice our Congregation has made (admittedly without always sufficiently preparing for it) puts our trust firmly in the action of the Holy Spirit: we have chosen not to work in separate national or regional groups but inter-culturally, so as to give a strong witness to our world which has difficulty in finding the way to peace.

### **The dazzling strength of a witness of suffering**

I find the articles in this edition that talk of suffering very impressive. **Michel Boutot** found it impossible to face up to his sickness objectively. His life was thrown into confusion and he could see no point to his existence on this earth. But his suffering led him eventually to the foot of the cross of Jesus, from whence he received a new light and the courage to start living his life at a different level.

**Willy Nugent** leads us into a milieu which, at first, appears terrifying, a place of mental isolation, degradation and violence. But he shows how one can gradually perceive the fruits of the Holy Spirit which we read about in many places in the New Testament. He was bowled over and challenged by his discoveries. In that unlikely place, he found hidden treasure which would affect him for the rest of his life. In all our lives there are encounters which are full of revelations. They can change the criteria of our opinions and judgements and force us to look again at the reasons for our self-esteem and the value of the apostolic engagements we have chosen.

From the oriental tradition, we have received the image of Christ in glory on the cross, which flows from the theology of the New Testa-

ment. Suffering, death and resurrection are inseparable. The new life to which Jesus rose was his life of trust, hope and love which he led up to the point where everything was "consummated", where he offered up the totality of himself - his physical life, his popularity, his success, his relationships. It is the same with us; suffering digs deep into our being and leads us closer to the mystery of God within us by compelling us to descend to the depths of our own unique self, our own individual destiny and our own purified freedom.

Exegetes have shown how the *Acts of the Apostles* highlights the impact of the witness of the Christian community when the Church was in its infancy. On top of the qualities already admired in individuals and groups, the coming of the Spirit of the risen Jesus adds something else: that distinctive unlimited love of Jesus which is the hallmark of the life of God to which he fully acceded in his humanity. The glory of Jesus is reflected in the lives of people and communities, in actions which show a trust and love without limits – sharing everything that one has, having the courage to face up to violence and death, being bold enough to announce the Gospel to men and women to the ends of the earth.

To be witnesses to the Gospel, it is not enough to have a particular package of virtues: our words, our actions and our entire lives must radiate a love that is prepared to give itself totally in the context of a given situation. It is only then that we will truly reflect the light of Christ and the Good News of salvation. Theologians are returning once again to this scriptural notion of salvation in Jesus Christ, the only Saviour. This vision of the unique nature of the paschal mystery opens an alternative door to those non-Christian believers who were untouched by explanations given in the abstract categories of Greek philosophy and scholastic theology .

What this means in practice is that the concrete experience of the paschal mystery of Christ in our lives is essential for any missionary. It is clearly expressed in our Rule of Life: "*The Spirit makes us partakers in the death and resurrection mystery of Jesus and prepares us to make the total gift of ourselves for the Kingdom*" (SRL 10).



## Travelling towards the unknown

*"Our missionary life is like a great pilgrimage to meet the peoples of this world, giving preference to the most abandoned. At the same time, it prompts us to undertake a pilgrimage to meet our confreres and collaborators in all their uniqueness. At the end of so many encounters, we are led to make a sort of pilgrimage into our own inner being. Our whole life becomes a journey led by the Spirit, with Jesus, towards the Father". (Maynooth 0.5)*

This image of a pilgrimage, used frequently by the Maynooth Chapter, must not be seen as a journey where everything is perfectly organised in advance and nothing is left to chance. We are not fully in control of the direction our missionary life may take. Sometimes this is obvious: **Daniel Osei Yeboah** arrived in Sierra Leone for the first time just as the violence was breaking out. Like Abraham, he answered the call which led him towards the unknown. His journey was like that of Moses and the Israelites, crossing a hostile wilderness until he arrived at his "baptism by fire"; faced with the threat of death, he could do nothing else but cry out, "Lord, save me!". When he was starting out on his missionary life, **Bernardo Bongo** had no idea where his commitment would lead him. Eventually, after analysing the pastoral situation in Angola, he felt called to take a decisive step; he crossed over the front line to minister to the people in the area controlled by UNITA. He also barely escaped death on one occasion.

Throughout our history and in different ways, this missionary calling has led us Spiritans into the unknown: to the far east in the early days of Poullart's foundation, to the mysterious continent of Africa in the time of Libermann. Our commitment is a bold one, but it is not based on our own plans and imagined strengths; it rests on a trust in the welcome of the people, a hope that does not fail and a love that accepts the risk of losing one's life.

## A foretaste of promised joy

In his confidential letter, **Libermann** admits that he was never able to follow a pre-established plan when praying or giving spiritual confer-

ences. It was the grace working within that guided him. Our missionary life is also an adventure guided by the Spirit. It begins with a call that precedes our decision, which inspires us and helps us to set out, often on a very long journey. Perhaps we can identify the immediate source of our inspiration, but the sources themselves come from very deep in the earth. The journey is punctuated by unexpected meetings and apparently fortuitous events which light up the path we must take. It is a long road to be travelled, but there is a great value in the journey itself; as Goethe put it, "*We don't just travel in order to arrive*". And Libermann said something similar: "*We mustn't be impatient for God*".

Throughout our lives, we are accompanied by a presence and a force in which we recognise the face of the Lord and his Spirit. We already have a foretaste of the joy that we have been promised, and we know that it is something beyond compare. As we continue on our journey, as individuals and as a Congregation, we must become more and more motivated, increasingly joyful in our hope and evermore courageous and generous. The final destination remains hidden, but our journey on this earth gives us a glimpse of what the Bible describes as a great banquet, gathering together in peace all those people that we have known in this world of tears.

*Pierre Schouver,  
Clivo di Cinna 195,  
00136 Roma,  
Italy*

## REPLIES TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE ON “SPIRITAN LIFE”

by the Editorial Team

*As our regular readers will recall, a Questionnaire on “Spiritan Life” was sent out with Edition no. 9 in September, 1999. Here we present the results, add a few comments and give some extracts from the replies we received.*

---

Any questionnaire has inbuilt limitations, especially when, as in this case, it is distributed with the publication which is its subject. Presumably, only those who read the book will find the questionnaire! Moreover, amongst the many virtues for which Spiritans are justly famous, answering questionnaires, circulars and other information-seeking missives would not be top of the list! Despite all this, we feel there is still some value in the exercise, even if it is only to encourage the hard-working Editorial Team in their labours.

### **Who replied?**

In all, **127 confreres replied**. They were spread over 37 circumscriptions worldwide although, rather disappointingly, there were very few from the young provinces and foundations. Over 3,000 copies are printed, one for each member of the Congregation, and these are sent in bulk to all the superiors of circumscriptions. It would be interesting to know how many confreres do not receive their copy but this was impossible to deduce from the questionnaire.



**The results****1) Do you read *Spiritan Life*?****Yes: 93****No: 3****Partly: 26****2) Is *Spiritan Life* achieving the aims laid out above?****Yes: 108****No: 4****Partly: 2****3) Is *Spiritan Life* being used in your community/ circumscription as an instrument of on-going formation?****Yes: 37****No: 74****Don't know: 8****4) Are you happy with the presentation of *Spiritan Life* as a small booklet, or would you prefer another format?****Present format: 113****Another format: 1****A few comments on the above:**

In answer to number 2, there were many pleas to retain the experience-based nature of the contributions. Mission theory can

be found elsewhere. Confreres seem to be encouraged by hearing of the successes, the challenges and the (apparent) failures of others in situations similar to their own. The reality of mission is not carried out in the world of ideas but in the frustrating and inspiring, sinful and holy world in which we all live, the very world in which Jesus himself was happy to share.

A fair number spoke of using *Spiritan Life* for personal inspiration and on-going formation. A relatively small number spoke of its use in the context of community meetings, but others admitted that this was a good idea and that they would try it out.

The format received almost unanimous approval in the replies we received, punctuated by expressions of frustration regarding the number of changes in the past.

### **Some further observations by confreres**

- *"I found the articles of No. 9 inspiring and helpful and in their own way they are new approaches to mission. In Ireland, we need a new model of Church and anything you can publish that would help us bring about this change would be appreciated. I am working with the Dublin Diocesan Jubilee Committee and I am looking for new material that will inspire the members of this Committee and make them realise that wonderful things are happening in the mission ad extra. Thank you for making Spiritan Life a forum for on-going formation and animation" - Ireland*
- *"I love the form and content for Spiritan Life. We take a reading from the most recent issue as a beginning to our monthly community meetings. I believe that the format you use, long on human interest stories, light on philosophy and abstract spirituality, is the best manner of printed communication at the present time...The General Chapter which met*

*in Brazil was the first to realise that, in this day and age, the "the story" has more general impact than "the essay". The more I am in communication with fellow Spiritans, the more fascinated I am with our Congregation. There are thousands of great stories being lived by Spiritans as they follow the call of the Spirit to be with people who live on the edge of darkness" – TransCanada*

- *"I would prefer a format with more visual aids. It should be in Magazine-form like SEDOS, The Tablet. The topics should be more attractive" - EAP*
- *"I used it for the last session with our aspirants at Pointe Noire...I made special use of the article of Bernard Reniers on our founders, and the one by Vincent Choppart about street children, comparing it to the experience of our aspirants with the street children of Pointe Noire" - Congo*
- *"I enjoyed the last issue...I enjoyed it because there was very little theorising which we skim over without being inspired and without applying it to oneself" – England*
- *"I want to thank you very much for no.9 of "Spiritan Life". I am 86 and in retirement and it brings me great joy to see how my younger confreres are continuing the work throughout the world...I don't see any need to change the format: if they want, confreres can find plenty of other reviews full of magnificent photos. Thank you, Lord, for all your blessings!" – France*
- *"Thanks for the Questionnaire; it will help us to reflect together on our experiences, pray and work more together. Thanks for all the work put into it" – SCAF*
- *"It does not help when the Editorial becomes (salva reverentia) frivolous, when it says: "He (Jesus) had little time for*



*logic and common sense". This is not what "Fides et Ratio" says ...Another big question is about priesthood. Apart from the end of Fr. Sabença's article, where there is reference to a parish, the whole book could refer to a Congregation without priests" – The Gambia*

- *At 83, I feel a bit out of touch and find it difficult to keep up with things...I admire those who are helping their confreres to adapt". – France*
- *"As well as our reviews on news and spirituality, it is very good to have this publication of reflections on our Spiritan experiences" – France*
- *"I see "Spiritan Life" as a link between all of us in the Congregation. It is, in its own way, more far-reaching than either a General Chapter or a Provincial Chapter...I congratulate the Editors of "Spiritan Life"" – Ireland*
- *"The concrete experiences described in this number give us a picture of what Spiritans are doing today, and we can be very proud of them". – Canada*
- *"Set aside a section for readers letters in order to encourage a debate". – FOI*
- *"Please do not change the format every two years!!...The design on the cover certainly needs a long explanation to understand it!". – Maison Générale*
- *"I see "Spiritan Life" as complementary to "Mémoire Spiritaine". I am convinced that all our historical researches and publications are of little value unless they have a dynamic effect on our present practices...The two reviews together can help us break out of our isolation and enlarge our horizons"" – Gabon*

- *“Would it be possible to have more contributions from those in initial formation – their impressions and experiences, their questions, worries and hopes?” – Nigeria*

Finally, a word of sincere thanks to all those who took the trouble to answer the questionnaire. We have found it very useful and encouraging.





• *“Would it be possible to have more contributions from those in initial formation – their impressions and experiences, their questions, worries and hopes?” – Nigeria*

Finally, a word of sincere thanks to all those who took the trouble to answer the questionnaire. We have found it very useful and encouraging.



Finito di stampare  
nel mese di dicembre 2000  
dalla  
Scuola Tipografica S. Pio X  
Via degli Etruschi, 7  
00185 Roma

## **The Cover**

The triangle represents the Trinity: it is coloured red to accentuate our dedication to the Holy Spirit. The blue circle signifies Mary who became the mother of Jesus through the Holy Spirit; therefore one of the points of the triangle cuts the circle. The green path represents hope. Thus the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, under the protection of Mary, is travelling along the path of hope and trust.

Spiritán Life is published in English, French and Portuguese.

Generalate CSSp  
Congregation of the Holy Spirit  
Clivo di Cinna, 195  
00136 Rome  
Italy